

# Sensitivity to passengers' special needs is especially important during an emergency

by Kelly Heavey

Being a first responder to transit emergencies requires unique skills. Whether you are a driver reacting to an emergency on your bus or a police officer or emergency medical provider, you may be providing the earliest emergency assistance with individuals who may respond in unexpected ways. The Center for Development and Disability has just issued the second edition of *Tips for First Responders*. This handbook provides quick, easy-to-use procedures for assisting persons with disabilities during emergencies as well as routine encounters.

Transit has obvious challenges in passenger assistance, such as elderly riders who may be frail with limited mobility or passengers traveling with service animals. But some challenges are harder to recognize quickly, like encountering a person with a cognitive disability. How should a first responder react to keep the situation under control? Specific tips are provided in this book.

*Tips for First Responders* has nine sections and includes two subjects not included in the first edition: autism and chemical sensitivities. As research continues on treatment of persons with these conditions, the rules of responding keep changing. Here is a condensed list of the topics the handbook provides, along with a useful tip from each one.

## Seniors

"Always ask the person how you can best assist them." Repeat your ques-

tions, if necessary and determine whether or not the person truly understands your words. Use patience and be reassuring. An elderly person with hearing loss may appear disoriented or confused.

## People with service animals

The term "service animal" often refers to seeing-eye dogs, but keep in mind that there are many other types of service animals. If an emergency



*If an emergency occurs and evacuation is necessary, do not separate the service animal from its owner.*

occurs and evacuation is necessary, it is important not to separate the service animal from its owner.

## People who have mobility impairments

"Every person and every disability is unique...respect their independence." This section has subheads listing

types of mobility assistance you might encounter in an emergency evacuation, including crutches and lifting techniques for motorized and non-motorized wheelchairs. Generally, you'll get better results if you ask individuals how you can help them. How you assist people using wheelchairs will depend on whether the chair is manual or motorized, and how many people you have to help.

## People with autism

"Speak calmly—use direct concrete phrases." This topic covers communication, social rules, and sensory and behavior tips when helping an autistic individual are areas this topic covers. The person may respond to your questions by repeating a phrase over and over or talking about unrelated topics. This, the book says, is their attempt to communicate, not to disrespect.

## People who are deaf or hard of hearing

"There is a difference between hard of hearing and deaf. People who are hearing-impaired vary in the extent of hearing loss they experience." The provided tip of flickering lights in a room to get a deaf or hard of hearing person's attention can be applied to flickering a flashlight on a bus if you have a nighttime emergency. Carrying a pen and paper to communicate during a crisis also comes in handy with a deaf or hard of hearing rider. Keep your words as simple as possible to aid understanding.

## People who are visually impaired

"Some people who are 'legally blind'

have some sight, while others are totally blind.” These tips stress the importance of acting naturally around a visually impaired rider during an emergency. They can probably understand your words perfectly, so there is no need to shout. Avoid physically assisting them without asking first.

### **People with cognitive disabilities**

“Say... show...give...use...predict...ask/look for...repeat...reduce...explain...share.” These words are the subheads of this category, and the book lists very simple and direct instructions under each, useful when assisting a cognitively disabled person in a stressful situation. For example, say, “My name is...I’m here to help you, not hurt you.” Give extra time, if possible, for the person to process and to lower stress and fatigue.

### **People with multiple chemical sensitivities**

“Ask what the person is sensitive to, including his or her history of reactions to various drugs you may have to administer.” If you evacuate a person with chemical sensitivities from a vehicle, the handbook recommends taking the person’s own medical supplies and equipment with them, in case they are sensitive to the hospital’s or shelter’s care.

### **People who are mentally ill**

“You may not be able to tell if the person is mentally ill until you have begun the evacuation procedure.” If you suspect a mental disorder in a rider, the book says to ask them if they have one, calmly. It then lists how to comfort them, including showing empathy and calmness.

To find your own copy of *Tips for First Responders* for a complete list of tips, visit <http://cdd.unm.edu/products/tipsforfirstresponders.htm> ▲